



The Top Ten Shows in the UK and Ireland in 2024

From a characteristically tongue-in-cheek Yoko Ono exhibition to a group show on the 'Imaginary Institution of India'



BY LOU SELFRIDGE IN CRITIC'S GUIDES | 16 DEC 24



This was a particularly strong year for painting, with major artists – Barbara Walker, Marlene Dumas, Tracey Emin – showing some of their finest works. Other shows challenged the ways we engage with art in galleries: Yoko Ono's playfully participative art was the subject of a major retrospective at Tate Modern, whilst both Glenn Ligon and Pio Abad created works responding to historic collections at museums in Cambridge and Oxford, respectively. In no particular order, here are some of the standout shows from 2024.

Marlene Dumas / Frith Street Gallery, London



Marlene Dumas, *Mourning Marsyas*, 2024, oil on canvas, 3 × 1 m. Courtesy: the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London; photograph: Peter Cox

The disturbing beauty of Marlene Dumas's paintings was on full view in her recent solo show at London's Frith Street Gallery. Making weird, uncanny faces from the simplest of brushstrokes, the artist's raw, pared-back technique nevertheless produces hugely compelling images. This exhibition took its title, 'Mourning Marsyas', from Dumas's painting of the mythological satyr who was flayed alive for having tried – and failed – to best Apollo in a musical contest. Sean Burns, [profiling the artist in our September issue](#), wrote that, 'For Dumas, the story of Marsyas – with his torment, thwarted ambition and cruel demise – contains something prescient to this moment, reflective of a planet in perpetual war. Mourning, she implies, might well be the contemporary condition.'

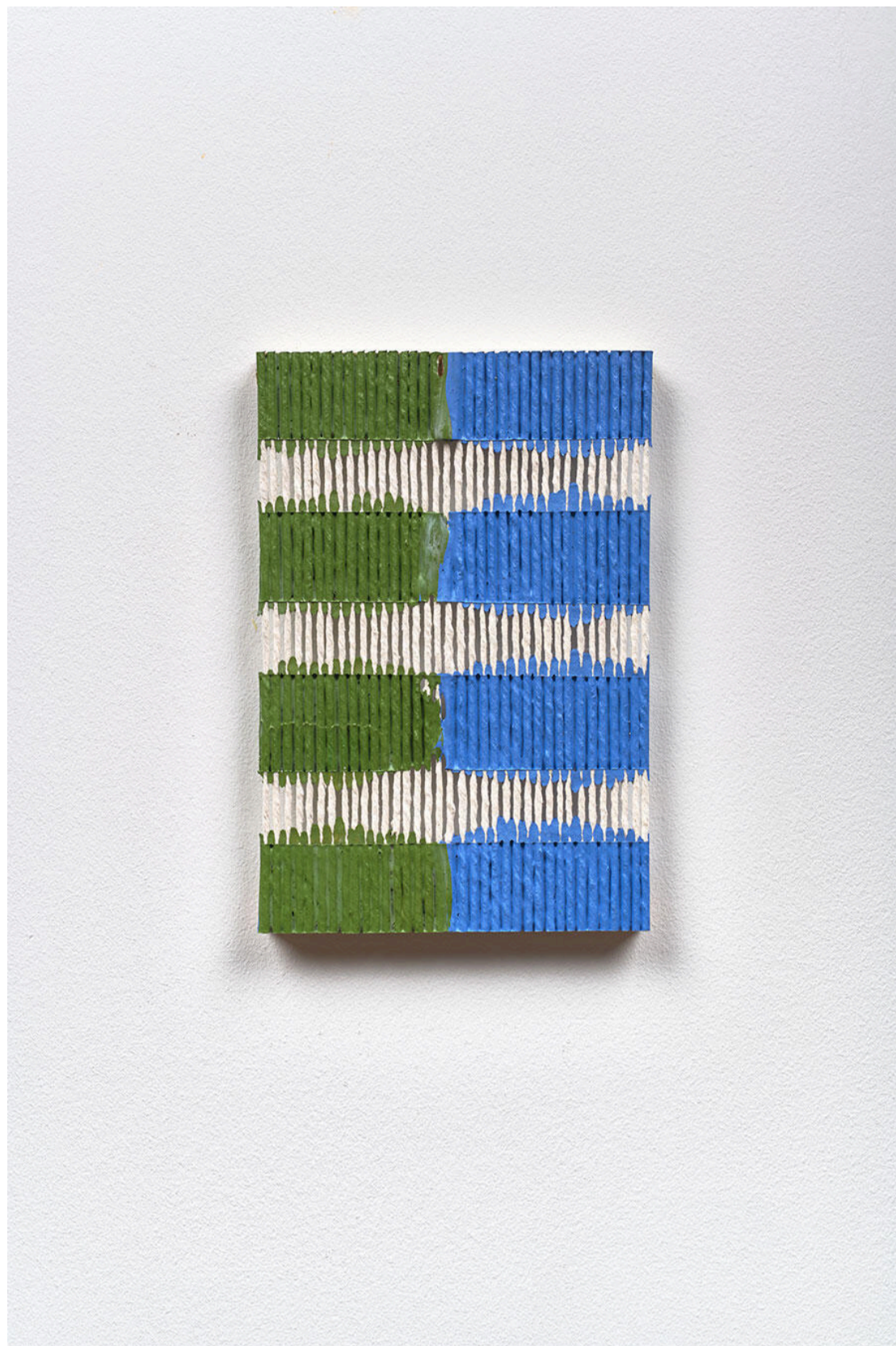
Yoko Ono / Tate Modern, London



Yoko Ono, *Add Colour (Refugee Boat)*, 2016, installation view. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: © Musacchio, Ianniello & Pasqualini

This major retrospective, charting almost 70 years of the artist's varied and celebrated career, felt overdue when it opened in February. The exhibition featured many of Yoko Ono's characteristically tongue-in-cheek works, including *Painting to Shake Hands (Painting for Cowards)* (1961–62/2024) – in which an aperture in a canvas allows people, gloryhole-like, to shake hands without seeing each other. Juliet Jacques captured the playful essence of this work **in her review of the exhibition**, writing: 'I stood there for a while: on some occasions, I never knew whose hand I took and enjoyed the little mystery it created; on others, people poked their heads around the canvas and we smiled at each other. For a moment, we were miles from the typical gallery visit in which we just look reverently at the exhibits.'

Brandon Logan / Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh



Brandon Logan, *Kiss 2*, 2022, acrylic and string, 20 × 13 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh; photograph: John McKenzie

It was still winter when I visited Brandon Logan's 'Dog Rose' at Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh. Having spent too much time looking at flaccid, half-assed conceptual art in various galleries across Scotland, I was in search of something to dig my teeth into. Logan's playful minimalism restored my excitement about how delicate and invigorating art can be, with an impressive display of more than 40 weavings, in which warps of exposed string are bound together with bands of acrylic paint. **As I wrote at the time,** 'These paintings are a meaningful addition to minimalist vernacular, seemingly pulled off with a nod and a wink.' This show announced a new talent worth watching, with an elegant precision underpinning his formally innovative paintings.

Glenn Ligon / The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge



Glenn Ligon, 'All Over the Place', 2024, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

In several of the Fitzwilliam Museum's galleries, Glenn Ligon's prints, paintings and sculptures sit alongside objects from the institution's permanent collection. As the artist told Terence Trouillot [in an interview for the September issue of *frieze*](#), he drew on the museum's collection 'to explore issues around collecting practices, wealth extraction and colonial expansion'. These interventions included removing from a gallery wall several paintings, behind each of which was a patch of unfaded wallpaper, protected from years of sunlight, revealing the silhouette of an absent artefact. Inviting Ligon to challenge the museum from within was a bold curatorial move – and one which paid off, with the artist's work both standing on its own merits and enriching the dialogue around the many historic, contested pieces it brushed up against.

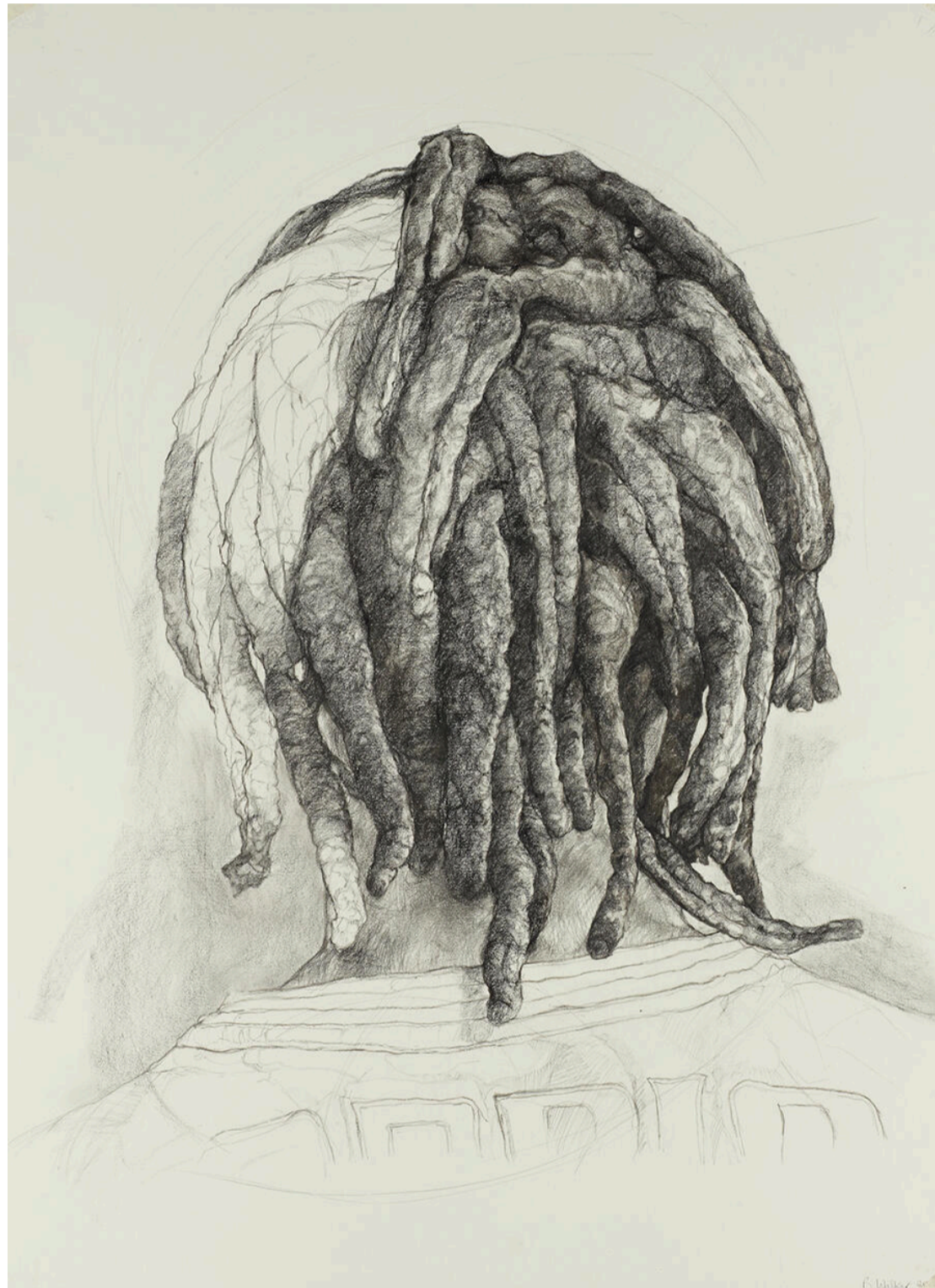
Pio Abad / The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford



Pio Abad, *I am singing a song that can only be borne after losing a country*, 2023, red coloured pencil and carbon transfer on heritage woodfree paper, 2.4 × 1.8 m. Courtesy: © Pio Abad

Also challenging how we engage with institutions was Pio Abad, who presented a series of works alongside the collection at the Ashmolean in Oxford. *I am singing a song that can only be borne after losing a country* (2023), for instance, is a vast, intricate and near-abstract drawing in red pencil of the cracked underside of a 17th century Indigenous North American deer-hide hanging. **Reviewing the exhibition for *frieze***, Crystal Bennes noted: 'Abad demonstrates that reading collections against the grain can transform museums, even if only temporarily or imperfectly, into sites of connection for anti-colonial struggles and the radical retelling of histories that are always at once political and personal.'

Barbara Walker / The Whitworth, Manchester



Barbara Walker, *Finito*, 2012, charcoal on paper, 77 × 56 cm. Courtesy: © Barbara Walker, Tiwani Contemporary and New Art Exchange. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage. 2024

In the first survey of Barbara Walker's practice, 'Being Here', the artist's figurative work – often intimate depictions of Black life – asserts her place as one of the most talented artists working today. Among the many top-tier works in this exhibition is *Finito* (Finished, 2012), a precise – and, ironically, unfinished – charcoal drawing depicting a male figure viewed from behind, their shirt and a section of their hair only half complete. **In a profile of the artist for *frieze***, Jamila Abdel-Razek argues, 'To encounter Walker's work is to be disarmed by her labour of love. "Being Here" will stand as a testament to what is to come, monumentalizing the marginalized by writing them back into dominant versions of history.'

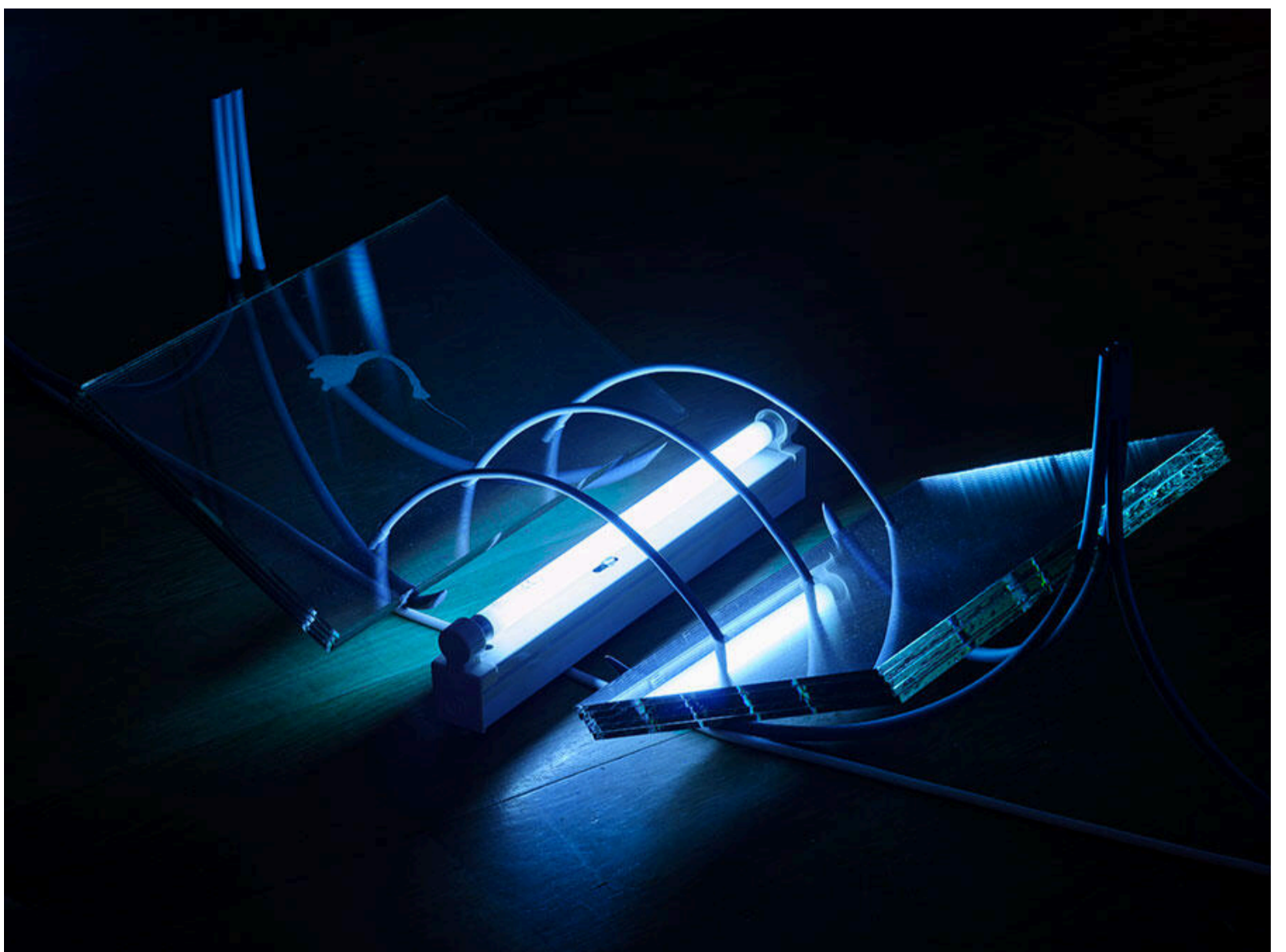
Sophia Al-Maria and Lydia Ourahmane / Spike Island, Bristol



Sophia Al-Maria and Lydia Ourahmane, *Job Lot*, late 1700s/2024, installation view. Courtesy: the artists; photograph: Rob Harris

At Bristol's Spike Island, Sophia Al-Maria and Lydia Ourahmane's collaborative exhibition, 'Grey Unpleasant Land', presents various objects that emblemize a certain kind of inherited wealth. Alongside silverware and a pair of velvet curtains, the show's most visually striking work is a collection of 240 chamber pots (*Job Lot*, late 1700s/2024), arranged on the floor in neat rows. Purchased by the artists from Graham Randles, these pots used to hang on the ceiling of his parents' pub in Liverpool. There's a fascinating duality to their presentation here, with the artists exploiting how the chamber pot can simultaneously represent upper-class, 18th century, country-estate life and working-class, 20th century pub culture.

Hamad Butt / Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin



Hamad Butt, *Transmission* (detail), 1990, installation view. Courtesy: the Irish Museum of Modern Art; photo: Ros Kavanagh

When Hamad Butt died of AIDS at the age of 32 in 1994, he had produced a small but potent body of work. This included *Transmission* (1990), presented at his infamous Goldsmiths degree show, comprised of a circle of glass books into each of which is etched an image of a triffid; lit by ultraviolet light, the books can only be safely observed through protective goggles. Butt's subsequent work pushed the idea of danger in art yet further with 'Familiars' (1992): an installation of precariously positioned artworks filled with one of three hazardous materials – liquid bromine, chlorine gas or iodine crystals – threatening to break out at any point. This exhibition, covering the span of his too-short career, highlights Butt's importance as a major conceptual artist.

Tracey Emin / White Cube, London



Tracey Emin, *Take Me to Heaven*, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 2.1 × 2.8 m. Courtesy: © Tracey Emin and DACS; photograph: © Ollie Harrop

Many of the paintings in this exhibition of Tracey Emin's recent work look almost bloody: showy, energetic strikes of red and pink slash across the canvas; underneath these marks, various bodies lie in bed, their flesh exposed. The paintings have an immediate, visceral impact and, the more you look at them, the more uncomfortable the experience becomes. As Emily LaBarge [wrote in her profile of Emin](#) for the October issue of *frieze*: 'Like the famous confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath or the fluid, form-bending essays of French literary theorist Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* (feminine writing), Emin's ultimate art is her preternatural investment in vulnerability.'

'The Imaginary Institution of India: Art 1975–98' / Barbican, London



Gieve Patel, *Two Men with Handcart*, 1979, oil on canvas. Courtesy: the artist and Peabody Essex Museum; photography: Barbara Kennedy

When I visited ‘The Imaginary Institution of India’, a group of people were clustered around Sunil Gupta’s ‘Exiles’ (1987), a series of photographic scenes of gay life in India accompanied by short, incisive captions. ‘Police operate here harassing people and intimidating them with beatings and extortion,’ reads one. ‘Sometimes they just want a blow-job.’ The exhibition surveys art made by Indian artists between Indira Gandhi’s declaration of a state of emergency in 1975 and the Pokhran-II nuclear tests in 1998, capturing the diverse practices that emerged and were sustained throughout this turbulent period. Large group exhibitions can be difficult to pull off, with works often feeling pushed into a smart but ultimately reductive ‘narrative’. This impressive show – packed with astonishingly rich contributions by more than 30 artists – allows the art to speak for itself.

Main image: Pio Abad, Giolo's Lament (detail), 2023, one of eleven engravings on marble, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist



LOU SELFRIDGE

Lou Selfridge is a writer and assistant editor of *frieze*. They live in London, UK.

TAGS

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